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# Chocolate Bunnies and Pork for Passover: The School and Home: A Symbiosis for Family Literacy

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This article explores the literacy partnership between school and family when intergenerational stories are made public.

### **Chocolate Bunnies and Pork for Passover: The School and Home: A Symbiosis for Family Literacy**

“His mother called him “Wild Thing!” and Max said, “I’LL EAT YOU UP!” (Sendak, 1963)

My son, Dino, roared with laughter each time we came to this part during each of the forty-three readings of the text in a single year. Even at the tender age of five he came to understand the power struggle between mother and son, and although he could neither define nor spell empathy, he could easily make a *text-to-self connection* Keene & Zimmerman (1997) that transcended a simple story of a naughty child sent to bed without dinner: In truth, he was the main character of his own narrative, and had effectively assimilated the monstrous attributes of the “wild things” in Sendak’s award-winning book. This was demonstrated each time thereafter whenever he perceived that yet another motherly demand was brewing, and he would respond with an “I’LL EAT YOU UP!” that was simultaneously accompanied by renewed giggles, and a growing sense of independence. Later on, as a student-of-academic-rigor in the first grade he would eventually use our nightly read-alouds as the basis for journal entries.

“Lst nt I dnt hv dsrt bcuz I was bd. I tld mom I wz gong to et hr up.”

(Last night I didn’t have dessert because I was bad. I told mom I was going to eat her up.)

*To dignify home literacy learning is to pay homage to the personal recollections of familial experiences which children (and parents) bring to school.* Allowing children to tell or even dramatize a past event or interaction with another adult enhances self-esteem, produces an instant author, and validates the learner as a writer, all of which are critical factors in literacy development. A spontaneous yarn that approximates reality can go a long way to the development of oral language and the acquisition of vocabulary in promoting conditions for literacy learning, all of which give credence to the idea that each new experience comes with its own lexicon Furthermore, when there is a reciprocal and intergenerational sharing of stories and humorous anecdotes, everyone becomes a participant in a literate partnership.

In the years that followed our readings of *Where the Wild Things Are*, (Sendak, 1963), Dino used past experience and prior knowledge to activate schema at many levels. Upon viewing the movie, he came to the realization that the indian in the movie *Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks, 1994) was not authentic as compared to the one in the book, especially with regard to speech and appearance. Dino’s ability to cite an historical inaccuracy demonstrated a *text-to-visual text* understanding, even though he had not yet been taught metacognitive strategies, or the importance of becoming aware of oneself as a reader.

And then a life-changing experience came after a trip to the Holocaust Museum. Experiencing *Daniel’s Story* (Matas, 1993), together with subsequent readings of *Star of Fear*, *Star of Hope* (Hoeslandt, 1996) and *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989), Dino made the inevitable, *text-to-world* connections from books whose themes compelled instantaneous reactions of anger and horror. Old words took on new, raw meaning, words whose significance was skillfully underplayed, a deception that belied unspeakable suffering – words like “relocation,” “occupation,” and “concentration.” And with the depth of understanding of these concepts Dino learned first-hand that it was possible to have an aesthetic response

to a piece of literature that had been written from an efferent perspective. He learned, too, that sometimes it is not possible to try to separate ideas and information from the feelings and thoughts that a piece of literature evokes (Rosenblatt, 1978). As a fifth grader Dino wrote in his journal, “ They use regular “tion” words to make you think that it was not so bad – I wonder why?”

As a parent I have witnessed first-hand the literate connections made by my son as he encountered genre, author’s style and craft. I was fortunate to have been there when he laboriously completed his first chapter book, *The Pee-Wee Scouts* (Delton, 1991), when he identified with Tommy De Paolo as the grandfather struggled to regain mobility in *First One Foot, Now the Other*, and when the main character fought for acceptance in *Maniac Magee*, (Spinelli, 1990).

As a reading specialist in a large CT urban district, I have spoken with parents whose tumultuous and unstable lifestyles have precluded regular home reading and reinforcement of those skills taught at school. Their own schooling has oftentimes been interrupted by circumstances and problems that typify a large city. Yet, the commonality for *all of us as parents of school-age children* is the need to connect the literacy goals of a district with home literacy experiences, to create a viable link between home and school, and to establish two-way communication of classroom and home literacy practices and values. As a parent I am committed to the literacy development of my child through books, experiential-learning, and ongoing family discussion.

As a teacher I realize the importance of using these essential components to integrate depth, drama, and authenticity in helping families to understand the value of stories, whether store-bought or homemade, in an environment that is supported by family tradition, love, and a sense of literacy community. What better way to model a love of reading to a child than to read an original story that was inspired by his first birthday, a stay in the hospital, or an argument with your mother-in-law about Easter Sunday’s menu when it just happened to coincide with the Passover Holiday? And that was how *Chocolate Bunnies and Pork for Passover* was born, a story about the reconciliation of both holidays in my family which, to this day, still elicits giggles from one side of the family, and grimaces from the other side.

When I was a reading specialist we had *Teatime and Booktalk*, weekly family literacy sessions where parents were encouraged to share journals of their thoughts, stories, and anecdotes. Each Friday morning from 9:00 – 10:00 we gathered in my tiny reading lab and read aloud the family stories which the moms wrote in journals similar to the ones that their children used in the classroom. By setting up the conditions for writing in the reading lab that paralleled the writing activities of the classroom, parents could better understand how their own children were instructed in the art of writing.

During this time I would read an expository or narrative text, and demonstrate a number of ways that reading could be integrated with writing, music, or art. Parents were always provided with a copy of the text, as well as enough supplies for the entire family to replicate at home, which included everything from painting supplies and paper, to crayons, or borrowing a cassette player.

Once the parent of a kindergarten student asked me if there were any books on ideas for science projects. I handed her an informational, but easy text on worms because I thought that it would appeal to her son. She came back two weeks later with a fish tank that had become the new residence for a worm farm, which she and her son had built together. She was sorry that the book got wet in the process of constructing the project and wanted to pay for it. Her son took first prize at the kindergarten science fair that year. Payment for me was knowing that the two of them collaborated on this spectacular worm project and listening to her son rattle off at least a dozen facts about worms.

Another time when a young mother brought her infant to Friday’s Teatime, I asked if I could hold the baby as I read a story to the group. As I read to the baby I deliberately made eye contact, while the baby

responded by cooing and gurgling. When the story was finished I thanked the mom for allowing me to hold the baby. The mom responded, “Gee, I’ve never seen my baby do that before.” To which I replied, “It’s important to read to babies because that’s how they learn.” The mom promised to read to her baby from then on. As the weeks wore on I looked forward to Friday sessions for Teatime and Booktalk. We laughed and cried as humorous long-kept secrets were divulged, lessons were learned, and a partnership was born.

This year in my town I hosted several district-wide family literacy events to which parents and children were invited. At Christmastime the lobby of Central Office was transformed into a living room as everyone participated in interactive read-alouds, amidst comfy chairs, storytellers, and a pasta dinner, after which each child received a copy of the book that was read.

Recently, we partnered with the city’s Public Library in bringing together families and educators to join in a shared reading of the Big Book, *The Big Block of Chocolate*, (Redhead, 1985) as we nibbled chocolates and discussed rhythm, rhyme, repetition, predictability, and how children learn to read. We encouraged parents to read and write stories to share with their children. We gave them books and set up a time to reconvene.

It’s about building the bonds of trust between the school, the community to which it serves, and allowing and encouraging families to recognize the home-based literacy activities that are inherent in their everyday lives. The books, stories, and experiences that emanate from a family whose focus is a life of literacy, and a district whose mission is to provide mutual access to shared literacy opportunities between parents and children – this is a symbiosis that builds partnerships – not programs.

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